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ON THE ORNAMENTATION OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE.*

By JACOB FALKE.

Probably the first work of an ornamental character which was actually completed in the full spirit of the early Renaissance, and in the new style as to form, was the tomb of Maria di Caretto in the Cathedral of Lucca (1413) by Jacopo della Quercia, who afterwards was known by the name of Jacopo della Fonte, from his fountain on the Piazza del Mercato at Siena. Of still earlier date is the design of another work entrusted to Lorenzo Ghiberti, whose bronze doors in the Baptistery at Florence are of such brilliant conception and execution. So early as the year 1401, the government of Florence resolved to order a second door to that which Pisano had before executed in the Gothic style, and entrusted it to a kind of competition, in which the three greatest artists of the time, Brunelleschi, Donatello and Lorenzo Ghiberti took part. The last, then but a youth of two and twenty, gained the prize, or the two others, as it appears, retired from the contest. At all events the execution was entrusted to Ghiberti. The completion of this work, so rich in figures, occupied him three and twenty years, and when finished, met with such approbation that he immediately received an order for a second door, which he completed in the interval between the execution of the first and 1444. Both these gates, extolled to the highest degree by his contemporaries, have always excited the admiration of posterity, and Michael Angelo is reported to have said that they are worthy to be the gates of Paradise itself. If this praise is especially due to the innumerable figures represented in relief, these works are by no means less admirable from our point of view, namely, the ornamental, and are rich in instruction both for ourselves and all time, showing

how naturalistically and yet artistically natural models are treated.

The gates are surrounded by a framework, on which are represented plants, foliage, flowers, fruits and birds in high relief, all natural, to the life. Every single fruit, every single leaf is executed most truthfully and the free life of nature disports in the movement and bend of the boughs. The plaster casts of these decorations of the gate, which we usually meet with in Museums, cannot give any correct idea of the artistic treatment. In the originals the fruits, leaves and birds are freely executed in bold relief, so that the shadows are deeper and stronger, and the impression altogether freer and bolder than in the cast, in which almost the whole undercarving, and with it, what we may call the inner work necessarily disappears. But, notwithstanding the careful execution, and scrupulous adherence to nature in detail, the general impression is not naturalistic, at least not in the sense in which we of the nineteenth century have used the term. Just as when some artistic hand has most skillfully bound together wreaths, festoons and fruits, so here, hang plants and fruits, bound together or free, united in groups or bunches, carefully divided, though not in too regular intervals, so that the eye falls on certain prominent points, where light and shade play freely, while in the intervals themselves the plastic life gradually expires.

This kind of naturalistic ornamentation, as it was here practised by Ghiberti in the highest perfection of detail combined with the utmost artistic skill, became the ruling model for the whole Renaissance. It is still to be seen in its latest productions, in the carved fruit and flower-ornaments of Brustalone, which are not without naturalistic truth and taste, strength and boldness, but

* See page 129 *ante*.

are destitute of any of that delicate perception of nature, that reserve and that judicious arrangement, which are just the excellencies of the early Renaissance. Another artist of this period, a somewhat younger contemporary of Ghiberti, Luca della Robbia, so famous for his plastic works in glazed clay, was the next to make any peculiar application of this kind of ornament, surrounding his relief panels with festoons of fruit. His material permitted the addition of colors to his bold and natural figures though he could make use but of few. Other artists followed his example, and festoons of flowers and fruits became the grand element of the Renaissance ornaments, while generally these are carried by naked boys, both festoons and figures standing out in high relief. Raffael and his pupils make much use of this ornament in the form of luxuriant garlands of leaves interspersed with rich flowers and luscious fruits, to form a framework to the fresco-painting of their vaulted roofs. (Fig. 4.)

The motives, which play the chief part in this style, are chiefly borrowed from the antique: we find them both in the plastic, and in the colored decorations of the later Roman period. But they scarcely give us that impression, because we can pass over the antique models and go back to nature itself for their origin. The antique influence is more strongly and more clearly perceived in the second kind of the Renaissance ornament, which is to be considered as panel ornament on flat surfaces, covering pillar and post, frieze, broad borders and panels, and whatever else is of superficial nature. It is in this that the peculiar ornamentation of the early Renaissance displays its richest exuberance, literally covering with plastic work everything which other decorative arts have allowed to remain unembellished, and even trespasses into their domains. Posts, doorways, pillars, tombstones, altars, fonts, and indeed whole buildings, the Certosa of Pavia, for example, it overloads with a luxuriance, as if scrolls and creeping plants covered and concealed the walls, tendrils bent in with every involution by the hand of art, and leaves and flowers distributed and arranged in every position with the most delicate taste.

The first element, however, of this style of ornamentation is the plant, but not treated naturistically, but freely and conventionally. Let us take for our example the ascending panel ornament of a pillar or jamb, for which perhaps a plant growing out of the ground is chosen as the motive. Its roots, which are of no beauty, are covered with broad leaves of the acanthus. Then the stem or stalk rises up, and shoots forth, not in the accidental irregularity of nature, but right and left in measured distances, leaves, flowers or fruits, so that each side corresponds with the other, and no disproportionate intervals are left without their ornaments. This rythmical disposition is one of the chief characteristics of the style. If the surface to be ornamented is of considerable height or extent, care is taken that the eye should find repose, while at equal distances certain points or parts stand out prominently to view through the importance or abundance of the ornament, or through stronger plastic treatment. Sometimes flowers fulfil this office, or the

knobs of leaves and branches, or various other objects, which have introduced themselves into the vegetable element as we shall presently see.

In such arrangement and disposition of ornament, two things were always kept in view by the great artists in this line, first, the application of the leaves, stalks and flowers to the stem, which we may designate as the lineament, and secondly, the plastic treatment. With regard to this last point, I would remark, that at present I am only speaking of plastic ornament as pioneering the way which the painters art seems only then to have followed. There are therefore sculptors, to whom we must attribute the greatest merit, and if it was Lorenzo Ghiberti who brought the naturalistic tendency which we have before described, to such perfect artistic execution, it is above all to Donatello that the palm must be given for excellence of plastic treatment. His followers, however are numberless, and if I desired to name them all, I should be obliged to reckon up the whole tribe of sculptors and architects of the fifteenth century, even to the great Andrea Sansovino, who, at the end of the early Renaissance period by his unrivalled sense of beauty and excellent execution, elevated this style of ornamentation to its most perfect stage. His celebrated sepulchral monuments in Santa Maria del Popolo at Rome (Fig. 5) are good examples of his art.

The first consideration with the great Masters of ornament was, as we have said, the application of the running lines, which the leaves, stalks and flowers form on the stem. The one great law, which here serves for a guide is this, that no line should be thrown off too abruptly, but that it should form the same delicate relation to the stem as the tangent to a circular arch, springing from it, and separating itself from it in easy and graceful movement. The same law prevails in other cases, as for example in the involutions of the acanthus, for here also it is important that leaves and shoots should unite tangentially with, and flow gracefully into the principal stem and its convolutions.

Still more important than this, hardly perceptible indeed at first sight, but a most essential law for all artists in ornamentation is the plastic treatment. In order to prove the superiority of the sculptors of the early Renaissance in this respect, I must enter more at large into the different sorts of relief ornament. The essence of relief consists in producing by different heights and depths alternately with different levels, a play of light and shade of greater or less degree, in order to render the form distinct and lifelike, and according to the design and style, the heights may be made to stand out in greater or less elevation in order to produce stronger or weaker lights and shades, and through them, more vivid, stronger or more delicate effects. Hence there are three different kinds of relief, though with many intermediate shades, which are usually designated as the flat relief (*basso relievo*) the high relief (*alto relievo*) which shows figures standing perfectly out from the plane surface, and between these two the middle relief (*mezzo relievo*) which gives the half raised figures.

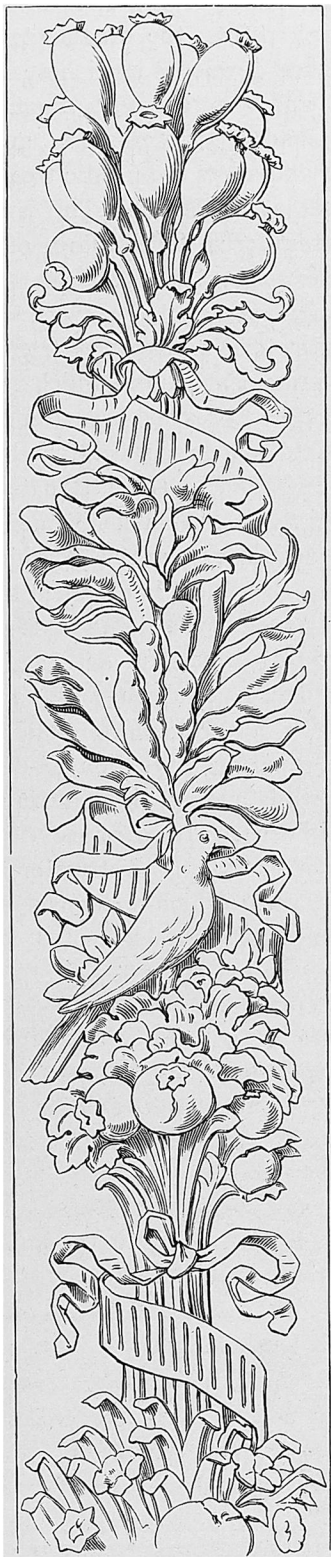


Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

- Fig. 3. Ornament, by Lorenzo Ghiberti.
 Fig. 4. Arabesque by Baccio Piatelli in S. Agostino at Rome.
 Fig. 5. Ornament, by Andrea Sansovino.

As we have said, the intermediate shades between them may be many, and so it is also with the flat relief which may in general be designated as peculiar to the artists of the early Renaissance. The Assyrians and Grecians indeed practised the flat relief, but in quite a different manner. If we may compare great things with small, we may say that the *mezzo rilievo* resembles a mountainous country, the Assyrian a high plain with sharply sloping borders. That antique relief consists essentially of two planes, one the original surface, the other raised above it, the latter of which, falling away abruptly all round, forms a sharp outline, while on the other hand, the more central part with little movement and modelling shows but gentle indentures and elevations.

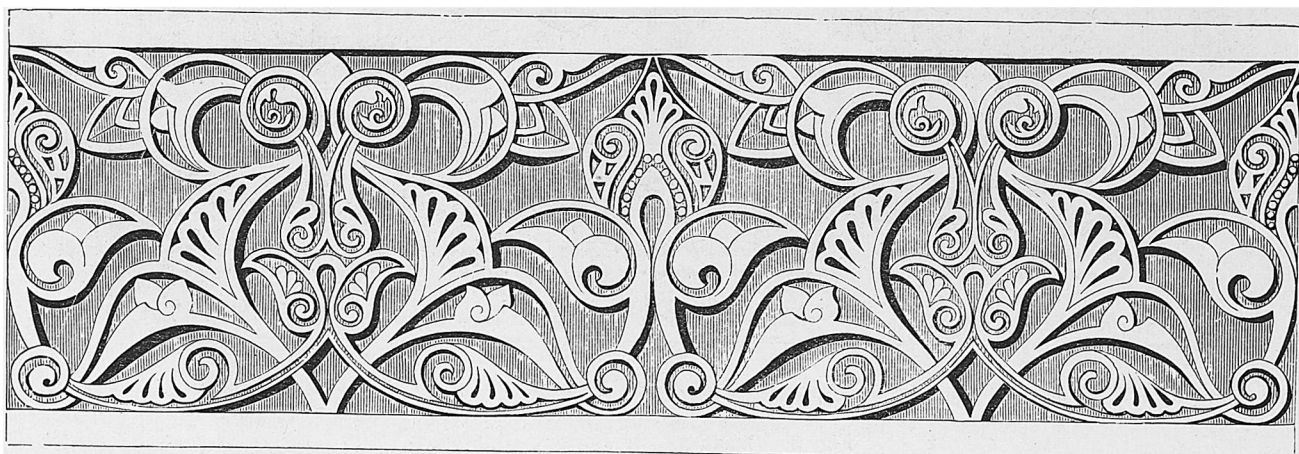
This is not the style of the early Renaissance though there are some few examples which bear some resemblance to it, the highest points being kept flat, and the plastic treatment often graceful and delicate. The early Renaissance however was entirely unacquainted with the undercut ornament with flat contour falling off sharply all round, but raised its plastic forms in graceful movement gradually from the principal surface. With the feeling that its whole style was essentially a decoration of surface, just as also in the architecture of the same style, the profiles, or projecting parts are for the most part kept within strict bounds, it never in its highest points overpasses a certain modesty. Its single, stronger elevations it reserves generally for those places which serve as points of attraction or repose for the eye, and, as I have already stated, divide the ornamental composition into certain members and partitions.

But in the midst of the original surface and these moderately high points, the ornamental sculpture of the early Renaissance develops its richest life by ever changing surfaces, and together with them an endless play of light and shade. Its transition and gradations are most delicate, and allow the plastic treatment to diminish and expire just as delicately. This style indeed is not without a certain force, for it allows of deep indentations and even undercarvings so that clean and sharp lights can be placed in juxtaposition with dark and distinct shadows. If the eye is fastened from a distance upon the high and prominent points, which prove that a spirit of arrangement has presided over the composition, there discloses itself to a nearer spectator the charming movement of the lines and of the alternative levels, as well as the play of light and shade, while a close inspection discovers the delightful manner in which the whole surface is treated. Every leaf is designed to the life, without being fettered to the accident and irregularity of nature. And thus, in this wonderful art, are united with the most graceful delicacy, which long constituted its principal tendency, a natural and forcible vitality full of expression, and a perfect execution of detail.

But notwithstanding these advantages, the ornamentation of the early Renaissance carried within itself the germ if not exactly of destruction, yet of a certain degeneracy, a germ which was involved in the objects, which it selected as the means of decoration.

(To be continued in the next number.)

SPECIMENS OF ORNAMENTATION.



No. 1. Arabian Ornament.